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## Conversations Between a Foreign Designer and Traditional Textile Artisans in India: Design Collaborations from the Artisan's Perspective

Deborah Emmett

### Introduction

Last June I spent ten days in Kashmir, India working on new embroidery designs for my company's range of scarves and home furnishings. I rely upon the expertise of textile artisans skilled in the crafts of sozni, ari, crewel and chain stitch embroidery to assist me in realizing my design concepts. At this time, each year, for over ten years I have returned to Kashmir and gradually developed creative collaborations with these artisans. In particular I enjoy spending time at Rehman Sofi's crewel embroidery workshop where Mehraj, an expert crewel embroiderer, and I select colours from the various wool bundles hanging from the workshop's rafters to test on the designs. Beforehand I visit the workshop of Fayaz Ahmad Jan who is a *naqash* or draftsman. He takes my computer-generated designs and modifies them to suit the crewel technique before printing the designs on cotton fabric ready for embroidery.



Figure 1. Fayaz Ahmad Jan, chain stitch draftsman, with Rehman Sofi.  
Permission. Image by Deborah Emmett.

Mehraj and Fayaz are members of India's traditional crafts population that forms the second largest employment base after agriculture. According to the 2011 *Crafts Economics and Impact Study (CEIS)* by the Crafts Council of India around 200 million people are involved in the handicraft sector.<sup>1</sup> These traditional artisans are mainly rural based and belong to low socio-economic sectors of society. Their skills are learnt as apprentices or passed on by family members outside the mainstream educational system. The artisan communities developed their crafts intrinsically from the use of natural resources readily available in their local environments.

There is a global awakening of the importance of artisans and their culture to a sustainable world. The *CEIS* describes the growth of 'cultural economics', 'there is recognition of the living fabric of community and social relationships that go beyond monetary value.'<sup>2</sup> Increased environmental awareness has added significance to the fact that artisans prefer to use natural resources in the creation of their products. As a result new urban markets are developing of consumers for the

<sup>1</sup> April 2011. Craft Economics and Impact Study (CEIS). Crafts Council of India. 1

<sup>2</sup> April 2011. Craft Economics and Impact Study (CEIS). Crafts Council of India. 9

products of traditional artisans because their 'crafts inherently represent, to the patron of sustainable practice, a connect and concern with material, and the environment.'<sup>3</sup>

### **Western Designer Intervention**

Now familiar terms such as eco fashion, design sustainability and ethical design are increasingly included in the marketing of Western fashion labels. Many contemporary fashion designers integrate a social consciousness into their design practice, some through their work with traditional textile artisans by including the artisans' techniques within their designs.

As is evident in many areas of art and design, fashion designers have long been inspired by the crafts from different cultures and countries. In the past Western designers have copied traditional craft elements from other cultures and, according to their own interpretation, incorporated them into their designs. The resulting clothing designs still kept in place the tastes of the designer's market and were produced according to Western industry standards. But with the growing sense of social consciousness and the perceived link of traditional textile artisans with positive environmental practice more designers are choosing to work directly with artisan communities. In India foreign fashion designers have teamed up with NGOs (non-government organizations) or artisan community groups to include traditional embroidery, weaving and printing techniques in their designs.

An ongoing debate continues between craft promoters, craft organisations and textile academics about what is termed designer intervention with traditional artisan communities. Some fear that the artisan's role will become that of only a producer and through the designer's influence, the cultural context of the craft lost when the products are developed for a consumer market unknown to the artisans. Indeed designers should attempt to understand and respect the historical, cultural and social contexts of the artisan communities with whom they interact.

However, the artisan communities are generally geographically remote and as a consequence the artisan's knowledge disconnected from current trends of the mostly urban and global markets. In the Foreword of *Designers meet Artisans* Indrasen Vencatachellum, UNESCO Chief, Section for Arts, Crafts and Design, asks 'Can there be a well-balanced and mutually beneficial interaction between designers and artisans?'<sup>4</sup> He discusses the need for the designer to act as an intermediary between the artisan and the consumer, "a 'bridge' between the artisan's know-how and his knowledge of what to make."<sup>5</sup>

Indian textile artisans have been exposed to foreign interpretations of their designs for centuries, given India's history of European colonisation. Nevertheless there are limited examples where a traditional craft has 'contemporized itself successfully and viably, whether for Indian or overseas markets.... Some exquisite forms of craft are simply dying out.'<sup>6</sup> Given the market variations and changing trends of fashion it is difficult for the artisans to be competitive considering their lack of access and exposure to global consumers. Foreign designers have this knowledge and therefore can act as intermediaries between traditional textile artisans and a consumer market that prefers eco-friendly, handmade quality products.

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<sup>3</sup> Wood, Sharmila 2011. "Sustaining crafts and livelihoods: handmade in India " *Craft + Design Enquiry* no. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Vencatachellum, Indrasen. "Foreword to Designers Meet Artisans: A Practical Guide." Published jointly by the Craft Revival Trust, Artesanías de Colombia S A and U N E S C O, 2005. v

<sup>5</sup> Vencatachellum, Indrasen. "Foreword to Designers Meet Artisans: A Practical Guide." Published jointly by the Craft Revival Trust, Artesanías de Colombia S A and U N E S C O, 2005. v

<sup>6</sup> 2005. Designers Meet Artisans

A Practical Guide. edited by Cecilia Duque Duque and Indrasen Vencatachellum Ritu Sethi: Published jointly by the Craft Revival Trust, Artesanías de Colombia S A and U N E S C O. 16

However the practicalities of language differences, geographic distances and bureaucratic constraints can stymie even the best intentions by the foreign designers who want to be directly in contact with the artisans. According to my own experience as a designer initial contact when sourcing artisans to work with in India is frequently an agent or business owner based in the city. But it is important to go beyond the urban environment to record the voices of the rural environment, the artisans' perspectives on their craft industry including their collaborations with foreign designers.

### **Textile Artisans' Communities and Business Models**

Through my research and design practice in India I have established direct communication with several traditional textile artisan communities. By conducting a series of interviews with some of these artisans my intention was to ascertain their viewpoints of the craft industry in contemporary times including the artisans' impressions about their experiences of working with foreign designers. I found there is limited existing research that records the 'voice' of the artisan. By examining the various business models involving artisans, including those who participated in the research interviews, I determined the business frameworks that designers must comprehend before working collaborations are developed.

The flexibility of roles performed by artisans is apparent throughout an entire textile artisan community. Indeed the location of the work can vary from the artisans' homes to workshops or small factories. A textile community will be based around a key technical process that requires highly developed skills like weaving or embroidery. Linked to this technique are preprocessing and certain post processes that require varying levels of skills. For example, for both weaving and embroidery yarn has to be dyed while the completed pieces are sent for washing. Before block printing can commence the woodblocks are carved and inks mixed.

According to *CEIS* many artisans work from home - 45% are women. Their craft output is given to a businessman who has made a capital investment in the equipment required or has made a loan to the artisan, particularly for materials required for production. While interviewing Rehman Sofi of Sofi Handicrafts in Srinagar I observed the operation of this business model. Women crewel embroiderers came to Sofi's workshop with completed crewel fabric lengths that they had embroidered in their homes for which they received payment. Sofi supplied them with more stenciled cotton fabric lengths and dyed wool yarn. These materials are weighed before distribution, unused materials are returned after the embroidery is completed. Similarly near Barmer, Rajasthan, I watched women applique embroiderers deliver their finished work to Hitesh Taparia, secretary of an NGO based in Barmer. Taparia, or one of his team, provide the women with materials and stenciled fabric lengths that they take to their, often remote, homes to applique embroider.

Other entrepreneurs provide a workshop employing 5 – 15 artisans. These businesses are often unregistered or registered as local businesses without export licences. A participant in the research interviews, Dinesh Chhipa began his woodblock-printing factory in 2001 in Sanganer, Jaipur, Rajasthan. He explains why he established his own factory.

This is my family's work. My father, my grandfather, we are all chhipas or woodblock printers. Chhipa is our caste. I have six brothers and they are all chhipas. All my brothers have had separate printing businesses for the last fifteen years. We were a joint family but with marriages and children the family got too big so we made separate businesses. Our children get better education when we have separate businesses.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dinesh Chhipa, block printer, interview by author, Sanganer, near Jaipur, December 22, 2012.

Dinesh Chhipa employs ten printers, although some are from Sanganer, most are from other Indian states of West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh (UP). Although trained as printers these men were faced with unemployment in their home states and so forced to move to find work. Dinesh Chhipa claims that his employees 'have fixed pay and are paid twice a week, RS350 per day for eight hours.'<sup>8</sup>

Many textile artisans remain in their traditional communities and attempt to sustain their craft businesses often by relying upon government schemes and grants. The Government of India has a program where the title of Master Craftsman is bestowed upon eligible artisans whose products are included in the exhibitions. Misri Khan is an artisan embroidery group leader, in remote Darasat Village, near Barmer, Rajasthan, and he is a government recognised Master Craftsman. I discussed with him the benefits of such a title. Although he was pleased to have had the opportunity to travel to Delhi for government organised exhibitions Khan did not consider these events sustainable for his business. 'When we have been exhibiting in Delhi foreigners have bought products from us but as I don't have an export licence I have not had any repeat orders from them nor am I in contact with those people.'<sup>9</sup>

The involvement of contemporary foreign designers with textile artisan communities in India can create benefits, given that artisans' livelihoods are in danger of collapsing due to their lack knowledge of contemporary designs and products for new markets. Instead of traditional textile techniques being lost foreign designers are providing opportunities for their subsistence. Access to new markets can improve the economic status of the artisans while connected social enterprises established by foreign designers assists the artisans and their wider communities.

On the other hand, as discussed in *Designers Meet Artisans*, there is a need for foreign designers to understand and study the crafts and traditional products that they are trying to redevelop in order to instill sensitivity towards the needs of the artisans, and also minimize the space for exploitative middlemen and traders.<sup>10</sup> Direct interaction between the foreign designer and the artisans would seem to be the best way forward in achieving this balance. This would help demonstrate the commitment of the designer towards ethical design instead of possibly a marketing strategy for their customer base with a social consciousness.

The recognition of relational structures is fundamental to understanding Indian artisan communities. Typically in the West craft people develop reputations for their individual skills usually working independently in designing and making their products. In India artisans work within a collaborative community with a series of inter-dependent relationships in producing their handicrafts. Different textile crafts develop in clusters and therefore those craft people involved in a particular textile technique live in proximity to each other. For the artisans from Kashmir and the Barmer area of Rajasthan their textile crafts have been historically and culturally endemic to those areas while in Sanganer, Jaipur artisans have moved there from other parts of India as it has developed into a centre for woodblock printing and other textile crafts.

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<sup>8</sup> Dinesh Chhipa, block printer, interview by author, Sanganer, near Jaipur, December 22, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Misri Khan, artisan embroidery group leader, interview by author, Darasat Village, Rajasthan, January 6, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> 2005. *Designers Meet Artisans*

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Many artisans learn their skills from other members of their family. The skills are passed down from one generation to the next. Abdul Salim, a master dyer of tie-dyed and *bandhani* textiles learnt his craft from his family, 'I am not in an artisan' group, it is my family's business. I learnt this craft from my parents and began the work when I was ten years old.'<sup>11</sup> Abdul Salim works from his home with all the members of his immediate family involved including his wife. In the narrow alley outside their home a large vat of dye was boiling at the time of the interview. Similarly Bhukhu, appliqué embroiderer, from Maharbat Village, near Barmer, learnt her embroidery skills by watching her parents when they got work from Barmer, 'Then I went to Barmer and did it. First with a bigger stitch and now with this fine stitch.'<sup>12</sup> She has trained her niece and daughter-in-law the craft of applique.

Another way in which artisans develop their skills is through apprenticeships. Their training focuses on a particular technique that is part of the process in the production of a textile craft. Again these artisans are attracted to the craft because it is produced in their geographic areas although other members of their families may not be involved in the craft. Fayaz Ahmad Jan, crewel and chain stitch embroidery draftsman or *naqash*, owns his own business in Srinagar, Kashmir but was trained by the master, Khurshid Ahmad as an apprentice.

Kashmir is well known for the crewel and chain stitch textiles produced there mainly in the south of the state. Both men and women do crewel embroidery and although many learn their skills from other family members some train with well-respected artisans. Mohammed Ibrahim Dar a crewel embroiderer, from Redwani Village, Kulgam District, near Anantnag, south Kashmir discussed with us his training.

I learnt this art from Mohammed Maqbool Shah in this village about 25 to 30 years ago. He taught 5 to 10 people this work and they are now considered the best embroiderers. He used to give us very little money as we were taught. We realize that now. I don't know where Shah learnt to embroider. It has been done for centuries in this area of south Kashmir so he may have learnt from someone in Islamabad or Anantnag.<sup>13</sup>

Kunwar Pal, a woodblock maker, owns his own woodblock-carving workshop in Sanganer, Jaipur, where many of the woodblock-printed fabrics of Rajasthan are produced. Although Kunwar Pal now lives with his family in Sanganer he is from Farrukhabad, Uttar Pradesh where he learnt the trade from a master block maker. He also now teaches the craft. Like many textile artisans Pal was forced to move to find work after the printing business died down in Farrukhabad. He moved to Rajasthan where the woodblock printing industry still thrives.

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<sup>11</sup> Abdul Salim, *bandhani*/ tie dyer, interview by author, Sanganer, Rajasthan, December 31, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Bhukhu, appliqué embroiderer, interview by author, Maharbat Village, Rajasthan, January 5, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Mohammed Ibrahim Dar, crewel embroiderer, interview by author, Redwani Village, Kulgam District, near Anantnag, south Kashmir, June 16, 2012.



*Figure 2. Kunwar Pal and son in his woodblock workshop.  
Permission. Image by Deborah Emmett.*

### **Textile Artisans Viewpoints of their Crafts in Contemporary India**

The increase in the cost of materials has severely impacted upon the Indian handcrafted textile industries particularly as customers are not prepared to pay more - including foreigners. To remain competitive the extra material costs tend to be absorbed into the original price of the product. Unfortunately it's the artisans who suffer by receiving less money for their work. Changing dress preferences and competition from machine-made products also has affected the incomes of the artisans. Abdul Salim complained that fabrics have become expensive and Indian girls now wear jeans and tops, not traditional saris or salwar kameez, so there is less demand for his family's tie-dyed and *bandhani* fabrics. Prakash Dosi, designer and fabricator, owner of Marudur Art Impex, Jaipur discussed the challenges caused by machine produced alternatives, 'When we started it was very detailed handwork now machine embroidery is also done. Now the hand embroidery is ten times more than the machine embroidery. The foreign clients want to use machine embroidery because it is cheaper.'<sup>14</sup>

The changing quality of work was discussed by a number of the artisans. Production of crewel embroidery for the local Indian market is now mostly of inferior quality because the demand is for cheaper products. Crewel embroiderer, Mohammed Ibrahim Dar spoke of the current state of his craft, 'the quality is now not as good because the raw materials have become so expensive. The buyers, including foreigners, are not ready to pay extra for the embroiderer's labour. There is no shortage of skill, the embroiderers can do high quality work but much of the work we are given to do is of inferior quality.'<sup>15</sup> Misri Khan also blamed the rise in cost of raw materials and the customers' demands for cheaper products for the lesser quality of his community's embroidery work. 'We could do better quality work but this is what we can afford to do. This quality is what is in demand. We sell to people at exhibitions so affordability is important.'<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Prakash Dosi, designer/fabricator, interview by author, Jaipur, Rajasthan, December 28, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Mohammed Ibrahim Dar, crewel embroiderer, interview by author, Redwani Village, Kulgam District, near Anantnag, south Kashmir, June 16, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Misri Khan, artisan embroidery group leader, interview by author, Darasat Village, Rajasthan, January 6, 2012.



Commissions for designs from foreigners resulted in the use of new materials. Hitesh Taparia welcomed the use of other textiles instead of the traditionally used cotton for applique because it gave the artisans new ideas. Rehman Sofi said that crewel embroidery designs were now done on jute, linen, silk and velvet as well as cotton for foreign orders. The embroidery is more intricate and so sustaining quality work for some of the embroiderers.

In his interview Dinesh Chhipa discussed how he prints designs given to him by foreign customers because their work provides employment for many people in the Sanganer area but he professed that ‘I prefer the traditional designs instead of the designs from foreigners because the traditional designs are part of my art.’<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless foreign interest for traditional woodblock printing helps keep the craft alive and Dinesh Chhipa conceded that many traditional designs are exported as well as sold in the local market.

The Indian government has supported handicraft development with marketing venues since Indian independence primarily through the All India Handicrafts Board. In the 1990s the government shifted its focus from marketing within India to granting NGOs with assistance for artisan enterprise development including design and technical input, the focus being in developing exports for this sector.<sup>18</sup> This has included the development of new platforms for exposure to foreign markets. Misri Khan discussed the shift in their traditional customer base to a foreign market. ‘Initially this embroidery was done in homes and used by the local people for weddings, dresses etc. In the last 10 years interest has developed from the West and now we get samples through different organisations and develop them for them.’<sup>19</sup> He added that most of the designs used are traditional sometimes with modifications.

Prakash Dosi has worked with foreign designers for over 30 years. The first customers bought wall hangings, cushions, bags and bed covers – traditional embroidery, needlework and applique from the Barmer area. Now he said the situation has completely changed, foreign customers want to develop new products with their own designs and colours. Dosi described the design process, ‘Clients bring new ideas and we work out how to produce them and then I develop the designs. We sit together and blend their ideas with traditional designs.’<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

Through the interviews I discovered that many of the artisans have little to no connection with foreign markets and limited knowledge of the finished products they develop. This can be explained by the structure of the artisan communities where different artisans with individual skills are involved in producing one product. Embroiderers Bhukhu and Mohammed Ibrahim Dar are supplied lengths of fabric that they return to Hitesh Taparia and Rehman Sofi respectively after completion. Given the remoteness of their homes it did not surprise me that they had no contact with the markets where the embroidery is sold, in fact I was the first foreigner Bhukhu had ever met. Even Sofi who owns his business and has direct contact with customers could only surmise about the final destinations of the products. ‘I don’t know what the fabric is used for because I have never traveled

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<sup>17</sup> Dinesh Chhipa, block printer, interview by author, Sanganer, near Jaipur, December 22, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Dickson, Mary A. Litrell and Marsha A. 2010. *Artisans and Fair Trade Crafting Development*. United States of America: Kumarian Press. 16

<sup>19</sup> Misri Khan, artisan embroidery group leader, interview by author, Darasat Village, Rajasthan, January 6, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Prakash Dosi, designer/fabricator, interview by author, Jaipur, Rajasthan, December 28, 2013.



to a foreign country. It is sold as running cloth or as cushion covers, bed covers, chain stitch pieces.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 3. Bhukhu, applique embroiderer.  
Permission. Image by Deborah Emmett.**

These facilitators like Hitesh Taparia, Rehman Sofi and Prakash Dosi expressed the pressure on them by customers, including foreigners, to maintain or even reduce prices of the artisans' products while at the same time the price of raw materials has increased as well as competition from machine produced goods. Unfortunately it seems that it's the artisans' wages that stagnate despite rising living costs in an emerging Indian economy.

Realistically foreign designers rarely have direct contact with the textile artisans who develop their products unless they are determined to make that contact. The role of facilitators or those who are often referred to as middlemen is crucial in determining the progress of an artisan group, particularly as they are usually the communication link between the artisans and designers. In *Artisans and Fair Trade* the exploitive nature of middlemen is discussed given that many artisans work from their homes and are both dependent on middlemen and unaware of true market prices. The difference between money received by the artisans for their work and retail prices is enormous with middlemen profiting in between.<sup>22</sup> However another way of seeing a facilitator or middleman is as a leader. A person who is entrepreneurial and well respected in an artisan community can direct the group's success in engaging with external markets. They have an overview of the whole process and use that capacity to connect with particular artisan's individual expertise. Designers in turn benefit from these facilitators' understanding of their craft and problem-solving ability when developing products.

My research findings were contrary to common conclusions documented in *Designer Meets Artisan* and *CEIS* that foreign designer intervention can lead to an alienation of the artisan from their craft so that their role becomes that of only a skilled labourer. The artisan interviewees perceive their crafts as marketable commodities and are open to change to reach new markets. They may find non-traditional designs amusing and colour palettes quite dull but they still see themselves integral to the design process. In my own experience of developing textile designs with artisans in India and from

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<sup>21</sup> Rehman Sofi, owner of Sofi Handicrafts, interview by author, Srinagar, Kashmir, June 14, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Dickson, Mary A. Litrell and Marsha A. *Artisans and Fair Trade Crafting Development*. United States of America: Kumarian Press, 2010. 44

the response by the interview participants' inclusion is the most beneficial element in the designer/artisan relationship. *Designers meets Artisans* takes the importance of inclusion further.

‘That the artisans need to be involved in every aspect of market research, design, production, costing and marketing, and also need to understand the adaptations and changes in the form, function, usage and sale of the product that they are making, is a form of intervention that has achieved a virtual consensus.’<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> 2005. *Designers Meet Artisans*

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Fayaz Ahmad Jan, crewel and chain stitch *naqash* or draftsman

Misri Khan, artisan embroidery group leader

Mehraj, crewel embroiderer

Kunwar Pal, woodblock carver

Abdul Salim, bandhani/ tie dyer

Rehman Sofi, owner of Sofi Handicrafts

Hitesh Taparia, secretary of NGO, Barmer